



ourcommunity.com.au



**CENTACARE**  
Catholic Family Services

# **The Virtuous Circle:** **Community → Government → Policy → Action**

Address to the Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 5 June, 2007

## **The Honourable Peter Batchelor** **MLA**

Minister for Victorian Communities

\*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

**2007 Communities in Control Conference**  
**Convened by**  
**Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family Services**

If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the  
2007 Communities in Control Conference, Convened by  
Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family Services  
[www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak today, and what an impressive gathering it is. From up here looking down and seeing so many people here so early in the morning on the second day is truly a testament to the preparedness of our community sector here in Victoria.

At the outset I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

What I'm proposing to do in my contribution to you this morning is to spend a little time, only a little time, talking about the things that we're doing. But more importantly I want to share with you some of the questions about the future, some of those questions that I'm currently thinking about at the moment. These are what I believe are the challenges for government, but they are also challenges for you, so I want to put them fairly and squarely on the table and invite you to contribute to the discussion on those in the time ahead.

When I first became Minister for Victorian Communities, I asked my colleague, John Thwaites, who was the previous Minister, what it was going to be like. John Thwaites said, "It's fantastic. You get to meet such exciting and energetic people." And that's been absolutely true through every day that I've been the Minister for Victorian Communities.

Community organisations in Victoria do contain some of the most dedicated people that I've yet to meet. So I'd like to begin really at the outset by thanking all of you for the extraordinary work that you do for the communities that you serve in your local area, and when you put it together, that you serve Victoria generally. A great job is done by each and every one of you.

The person on the front of the conference program is holding up a sign which says, "Keep your coins. I want change." Now that really does encapsulate a philosophy that I'm sure that almost everybody here shares.

On my side of politics, we deeply believe that the government must have a role in providing support for those who are most in need. But at the same time, there is an equally pressing need for us to think more about fundamental change; change that focuses on prevention, not just picking up the pieces when things go wrong, and change that opens up opportunities to people who are excluded.

Two years ago in Victoria we set up a new course in the way we work with communities to overcome disadvantage. It was change, important change, and it was driven by two things. Within government, many of us felt we needed to do more to tackle disadvantage.

We also heard that message coming loud and clear from the community sector. About three years ago we received a series of representations from community organisations here in Victoria. Their key argument was that the State Government could and should do more to help those who are most disadvantaged. To the Government, the most convincing were the people who not only could point to the problems but also had some well-founded suggestions as to what we could do together.

I think Eva Cox made that point in her talk yesterday, that effective advocates talk about solutions as well as the problem. Now, we know that the Commonwealth in our system of government here in Australia controls many of the most important levers in combating disadvantage: social security, industrial relations, employment programs, the taxation system. But nevertheless, notwithstanding that reality, the State Government does have control on some important policy levers, areas like health and community services, our social justice system, our housing services.

As well as arguing that we could use those services to help the most disadvantaged, community agencies also made a number of other points when they were raising these issues with us, with the government.

Firstly, they said we need to change the way we provide those services, that government needs to change the way we are doing

things. The community sector argued that the government needed to give individuals and groups more involvement in decision making. And in particular, we needed to recognise the potential for community organisations to help in planning and to help in the delivery of those services.

And the second point that was made was, if we were going to make a change, we had to put substantial resources into those changes. In all, the discussions that we had made a very compelling case for change.

I was just reflecting upon the day that we spent sitting around at a Cabinet retreat, discussing how we could best put those ideas into practice. What all of this led to was a plan. It was really a plan for change here in Victoria. We called that plan, *A Fairer Victoria*, and we did that because we think fairness is really fundamentally important to this process of change. It's an important value, and to be not too political about it, it's a value that was neglected by our immediate predecessors.

Labor believes in fairness, and we want to do more to make Victoria a fairer place. *A Fairer Victoria* is a plan to radically improve the scale and quality of services, especially services that support people who are disadvantaged or excluded from community life. And over the last two years we've invested \$3 billion in that plan.

I mentioned earlier that we wanted to invest for the long term. And I'm sure you've all heard the expression, "Giving children the best start in life." For us, a fairer Victoria is all about turning words such as these into real action. And that's why we've put \$130 million into improving children's services.

It's interesting to note what has been achieved and what we've targeted. Well, in 1995, only about half the children under six were fully immunised, and the rate of immunisation, amazingly, was not getting any better. In fact, it was actually getting worse. That meant that some childhood diseases, like whooping cough, were beginning to reappear, and that's why our \$130 million investment included a major

effort to improve immunisation rates. Now Victoria has a full immunisation rate in children up to six years of age, and it's reached over 90%. Now, this in itself is an historic achievement because it's the first time in Australia that any state or territory has achieved that rate of coverage.

We've also put \$130 million into free kindergartens for low-income families in Victoria. We know that going to kinder does make a big difference in a child's future; by that I mean things like language and social skills, school achievements, making friends, learning how to get along with other kids. These are the sorts of things that kinder lays the foundations for. And in the long term, early childhood services like kinder can improve overall education results and employment prospects and leads to lower rates of crime in the broader community – all of this from an intervention at the very earliest of age.

These are just two examples of what we achieved through our three-year investment program in children's services.

In addition to children's services there are 13 other strategic areas that *A Fairer Victoria* focuses on. They cover fundamentally important social issues like responding to domestic or family violence more effectively, and creating new opportunities for people with a disability – \$200 million has been provided for aids, equipment, services and accommodation. We've also increased the support for mental health services, and we've boosted access to public housing – many of you would be aware of the half a billion dollars that we've put in to the biggest ever boost to public and social housing here in Victoria.

You'll be pleased to note that I'm not proposing to talk about all of the 14 strategic areas, but in your conference bags you will find a copy of *A Fairer Victoria*, the 2007 version. This contains the details of all of the 63 new commitments we made this year in the budget, it outlines how we'll be directing an extra \$1.3 billion as a result of the allocations in this year's budget. That's a lot of money, but we do recognise there's more work to be done. We're proud of those investments, but you will remember that extra investments was only one part of what

the community sector was saying to us two years ago in that early dialogue.

The second element that was raised with us was to get the community more involved in the planning and delivery of services. And that was much more of a challenge, I can tell you, in part because it requires a commitment on behalf of the government to do things differently. It means working with new groups of people, particularly people who sometimes haven't been involved in the decision-making or planning ever before. And it means trying new things. And it also means accepting that sometimes things don't work.

So in your copy of *A Fairer Victoria* you'll see examples of the processes that are already under way. We've launched community renewal projects in areas of concentrated social disadvantage. These projects provide funding for local communities to plan and help deliver the types of services they think that their local community needs. We've launched community building projects that involve more than 100 small Victorian towns, towns that are going through rapid change. Through those projects, we are helping those communities to plan for the future that they want.

Another example of the funding we've provided for is for social enterprises, and I've been very impressed with some of the small business ventures which have a social purpose. I recently visited one of these, a Canteen Plus project at the Kensington Primary School. This project was initiated by a group of African refugee women from the Kensington Housing Estate who had children at the school. Their school canteen, which had been closed for years, now provides healthy school lunches for students. It also provides a catering business for surrounding businesses and community groups to use. It employs public housing residents, and when the staff come onto the job they learn real job skills. And some of them have actually obtained TAFE qualifications in hospitality – all of this providing them with a pathway into the workforce, a pathway into economic participation.

Another program that we've undertaken is our Transport Connections program. And this brings together government, both state and local

government, with community groups and individuals, and transport providers, to deliver better local transport services. It does this by making better use of the existing transport assets that are already located and available in our communities. For example, school buses or community buses may not be used all the time – the Transport Connections Program helps to put people in touch with these resources a lot better.

An example of what this program does, I was talking to a volunteer driver who noticed that he always went to the football in a country area. So he was asked to drive the bus rather than his car to these football events and to take half the team with him. He thinks that's a fantastic opportunity for him and helps solve some of the transport problems for that community.

This Transport Connections Program as a whole will provide more than \$14 million to about 30 projects across regional and rural Victoria and the outer metropolitan area.

Now, I'd like to finish by talking about three particular questions that I've been thinking about. The first of these questions is that we've heard that the community sector, your sector itself, is facing challenges. Now what are these?

Well just to list a couple, firstly, with an ageing population and a decreasing proportion of people of working age, there is going to be a greater demand on support services that the community sector often provides. And whilst the rates of volunteering are going up, people are now choosing to volunteer in different ways; they volunteer for shorter periods of time and for different reasons than in the past.

And that's why we've set up the Stronger Community Organisations Project, SCOP. This is a task force which is now headed by Professor Allan Fels. What we want to get from this project is a series of concrete recommendations on how the government, but also how the community sector and business can work together to meet these new and modern challenges.

I'm sure that in your own organisation you've been thinking about these and many other issues, which is why I want to urge you all to get involved in the Stronger Community Organisation Project. You can download a discussion paper to help stimulate your thoughts from my department's website. The address is, conveniently for you, on the back of your copy of *A Fairer Victoria*.

The second challenge for us all concerns climate change. It's pretty topical at the moment, particularly if you're the Minister for Energy as I also am in the Victorian Government.

Now there is overwhelming acceptance of the need to take urgent action to combat the harmful effects of climate change. This will include action to reduce our energy consumption and to use energy more efficiently.

It now looks like we'll get a national emissions trading scheme in one form or another, sooner or later, depending on the results of the next Federal Election, and that will be a good thing, because it will help set up incentives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

However as the Prime Minister has indicated, it will probably lead to higher prices for gas and electricity. And the question is, how will we protect, and compensate, people on low incomes from these rises that will come from accepting a price for carbon? And if the Federal Government gains revenue, which it's likely to, from an emissions trading scheme, what will it be prepared to put into schemes that might be directed towards helping protecting the poorer consumers?

We also want to encourage people to make their homes more energy efficient in advance of any price impact of emissions trading. One initiative from the State Government will be the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target. This is a scheme, which is currently in its design phase right at this very moment, that will provide a rebate or an incentive program for being energy efficient in your own home. It will do such things as provide assistance for retrofitting or replacing old appliances with new energy efficient ones. There are other obvious



things that it will concentrate on, such as more efficient heating and lighting and better insulation.

That will be the situation for those who are home owners, but it will be very different for people who rent. While renters can do something to reduce their energy use, they don't have the ability to modify their own homes. And landlords say, understandably, that there's little incentive for them to make these changes because the benefits of those changes go through to lower power bills, which are captured by the renters. So the question here is, how can we encourage rental property owners to also invest in energy saving actions? We're beginning to try and work through these questions at the moment, but you may have some good ideas about this landlord/tenant dilemma. If you do, we'd certainly like to hear about them. We'd certainly like you to think about them.

And the third and final area I want to mention are concerns about corporate social responsibility. We know that businesses are increasingly interested in finding ways to support community organisations and to get involved in social issues. At the big end of town, there is real interest in this subject and a willingness to commit resources. You heard of Alcoa's commitment to assist community organisations just this week.

But the real issue from our point of view is how we can extend those relationships, not away from the big end of town involvement, but how we can involve small and medium-sized businesses at the local level. That's the next big question that we are trying to address – how can local businesses get involved with agencies across the street and around the corner? That's what we want to look at.

Perhaps in many places they already are and we don't hear as much about it. All of you in this room are experts in your local area and you may well have examples of great local partnerships with local businesses which we just don't know about. You may also have ideas how we can make this work better. So I'd like to mention an enquiry that's been established by the Victorian Parliament through one of their investigative committees, the Family and Community

Development Committee. This Parliamentary Committee will be looking at ways of encouraging the involvement of small and medium sized business in corporate social responsibility, and we want your thoughts on what's happening at the moment and what more could be done to foster these types of relationships.

So let me conclude with a few thoughts. A few years ago, well-researched proposals from the community sector helped to launch one of the biggest social investment programs ever undertaken in Victoria. We are now in the process of considering our next step, and your advice will help shape where we need to go to next.

When we launched *A Fairer Victoria* this year, one of our speakers was Tony Keenan, who was CEO of Hanover, and I'm sure you all know Hanover – it's one of the leading service providers for people experiencing homelessness. Tony was very welcoming of the \$500 million that we're investing into public and social housing. He also spoke about the three conditions you need to have to make real progress in tackling the big issues we face as a community.

The first condition he mentioned is that you need intelligent, thoughtful policy that is informed by solid evidence and good research, and much of that research and evidence has come from community organisations.

The second thing that Tony mentioned was that you need resources. And the Victorian Government, I can say, has been prepared to put extra resources in to respond to that research and evidence.

And the third condition that Tony highlighted is something else. What Tony Keenan said that you need is a commitment and passion, but more importantly, a belief that you can do things to make a change. Tony said there is no sense starting if you don't have that there.

And as I stand here today and look out on this audience I can see that we all share that commitment, that we all share that belief. That's why I'm delighted that the Department of Victorian Communities has been again able to sponsor the Communities in Control conference.

For the international speakers, including your next speaker, Angela Glover Blackwell, welcome to Victoria. And to you all, on behalf of the Victorian Government, I'd like to thank you for the work that you've done in Victoria and beyond. I hope that the second day of your conference will be just as an outstanding success as the first.

Thank you very much.

# Communities in Control 2007

Proudly presented by



and



With the support of our Alliance Partners:



australia's aluminium



If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the 2007 Communities in Control Conference, Convened by Our Community & Centacare Catholic Family Services [www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/cic)